

My Mother's Shoes

In the last years of her life, as a gift to my brother and me, my mother wrote her memoirs. There is a great deal of dancing in them. Of elementary school she says that what she mainly remembers is doing the Charleston and the Blackbottom at recess. Of high school: "The Women's Club, the Job's Daughters, the Mormons, the Eastern Star, and the high school all gave dances for the young people. So we had a dance to go to almost every week." She went to see a friend who was working on Catalina Island. There was a band on the ship so she "danced all the way over and back." Then came the Big Bands, college formals, corsages and dance cards. She met my father at a college dance.

In anyone else's memoir this might be less remarkable. But at age four, my mother fell ill after vacationing at a lake near Minneapolis. At first, even the touch of the sheets on her legs was too painful to bear. She didn't walk again for more than a year.

The family moved to Los Angeles where, at the Children's Hospital, she was finally diagnosed with polio. Her legs were working now, but her left foot wasn't growing

properly. She had an operation to cut the cord in the arch and spent another year in a brace.

I don't know if the operation failed or succeeded, because I don't know what she would have been like without it. Her left foot remained small and nearly toeless, a clubfoot that never landed flat on the ground. Her balance was always uncertain.

During the war years, shoes were rationed. My mother had a special dispensation entitling her to two pairs. She needed the right shoe from one pair and the left from another, much smaller pair.

But my mother did more than dance. She was an enthusiastic backpacker and fisherman. She and my father hiked all over the Sierras. She loved the ocean and swam often. In 1959 she won the Bloomington, Indiana women's city tennis title in a hard fought, three set match against Ingrid Remak. My parents had moved back to the midwest after they married and Ingrid was our next door neighbor. She was also my mother's best friend.

The whole neighborhood turned out to watch. We children sat on the hoods of the cars and eventually one of the neighborhood boys pointed out the obvious. My mother, a steady player with a good forehand, couldn't scramble. If Ingrid drove her back by putting the ball near the baseline

and then followed with a drop shot, my mother couldn't have gotten to it. If Ingrid did this repeatedly, she would win. It was a point of only academic interest. We all knew Ingrid would never play this way and neither, apparently, would anyone else my mother had faced on her way to the finals.

My mother taught nursery school, which meant she spent her days with a group of people close to and interested in her feet. When I had small children of my own, when she met their friends, her feet were always discussed. "Something's wrong with your feet," the conversation would begin. And my mother, very practiced at this, would agree. "Don't you know that everyone's got something special?" she would ask. "Just my luck, with me, it's my feet."

There was only one thing I ever heard my mother say she couldn't do. She couldn't wear heels. Her only dress shoes were open-toed, loose sandals. In Bloomington, in the winter, these were not ideal, but there were no other options.

When I was about five, my mother heard about a shoe store in Chicago. We drove there, saw a show, and my mother had a cast made of her feet. Six weeks later, she and my father went back so that she could pick up the first shoes she'd had since the age of four that actually fit.

The shoes were expensive. But my father, a big spender when in the grip of some new enthusiasm, ordered tennis shoes for her, hiking shoes, and shoes of red suede. In a spirit of solidarity, he had molds made of his own feet, bought himself a pair. Despite the different colors and different uses, these shoes all looked much the same to me.

This is my personal Cinderella story: years later, after we'd returned to California, my mother learned that the same company had opened a store in San Francisco. She went for a new casting, chatted with the salesman, and then took off her left shoe. "I know you," he said, watching her foot emerge. He hadn't recognized her face, but he'd worked in Chicago with her cast.

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When I became a writer, my father crept into everything I wrote. He died when I was just out of college. He was a brilliant, difficult man and my relationship with him was a difficult, too-short-to-be-fixed relationship. Even in my second novel, when I set out explicitly to write about my mother, the character based on my father took over. In the character based on my mother, careful readers (my children) discern more of me than of her.

So I've given a lot of print to the legacy of my father. On that side of the family there is depression and alcoholism, operatic emotion. My father's father spent much of his adult life institutionalized. Only recently have I come to see my mother's steady cheerfulness as a legacy, too, and in many ways the more interesting one. There may be a genetic component. My mother's resilience was evident in her mother and also in both her sisters.

What flexibility my mother had in her left foot, she attributed entirely to her mother. Grandma had rubbed it daily with cocoa butter, flexing and stretching it when my mother couldn't do so herself. No one told Grandma to do this. It just made sense to her that the foot should be kept moving.

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My mother remarried and moved to the beautiful seaside town of La Jolla, California. Coincidentally this was also the home of two of her personal heroes -- the Drs. Seuss and Salk. Her admiration for Dr. Seuss was a professional, nursery school teacher one. Dr. Salk was personal. She once saw him trying to cash a check in the grocery, having

trouble with a clerk over his I.D. It was unbelievable to her that anyone could not know who he was.

At eighty-four my grandmother had been physically active and mentally sharp. Within the family, we attribute this prolonged health to the massive amounts of sugar she consumed. Every day she ate store-bought cookies after buttering and sugaring the tops. She died suddenly and peacefully in her sleep.

My mother was not so lucky. In a routine blood test, she was diagnosed with chronic leukemia. This chronic stage was virtually symptomless, we were told, and could go on for years. When things became acute, the decline would be fast.

Her chronic stage lasted about three years. Meanwhile, her adoring husband began to change. He was often angry with her and his reasons made no sense. On the same day her blood tests worsened, he also got some test results. The doctor's best guess was Alzheimer's. That night in a strange, novelistic touch, someone driving by their house shot a bullet through the picture window of their living room.

My mother had a hard death. Her legs swelled grotesquely and her arms shrank. The inside of her mouth filled with sores so she couldn't eat. My stepfather had to be put in nearby nursing home where he was most unhappy. My

daughter, who was going to college at UC San Diego and keeping an eye on things, called me to say that, whatever my mother was telling me, I needed to come home.

I expected my mother to help me with her death. I expected her to worry about me, make things as easy as possible. I expected something like the death scenes in books and movies. But toward the end, when I needed her most, she was already somewhere else, deep inside her failing body. "She can't be your mother right now," her doctor told me. "She's too busy."

My mother must have had a hundred charities depending on her. After her death, I wrote them all, telling them to remove her name from their lists. I said as clearly as I could that she was dead.

Some of them have never been able to process this information. Thirteen years later she is still getting requests. Mostly I toss these, but once in awhile I open one. "How can we get you back?" these letters ask.

Sometimes I'm amused. I imagine the letter I won't write in response. "How can we get you to go away?" this letter begins. Sometimes I'm saddened. "How can I get you back?" I ask my mother.

Her husband survived her by only a few months. When we cleared out their house, among the things I could neither use nor throw away were her shoes.